

The story 'act of faith'



The story ' Act of Faith' is one of the short stories in Irwin Shaw's anthology of short stories titled ' Five Decades'. There are 63 stories in the anthology which were written in a span of five decades, the time for which the title is derived.

In this story, which is the thirteenth in the anthology, Irwin explores the theme of racial prejudice. Intricate in the story line is the notion that all around there is general negativity about racism and that true liberation from the perceived injustices lies in trusting other people.

The story starts with " three combat-scarred veterans" Seeger, Olson, and Welch who have been given a pass and want to go Paris but have no money. The main character, Seeger, a Jew, approaches their captain to lend them money since their salary had delayed for three months. The captain obliges and lends him, 200 francs from the four hundred that he had.

The money is however not enough for the three of them and Olson even comments that "...we won't be able to pinch a whore's behind on the Boulevard des Capucines ..." (pg 287). They even think of selling their combat jackets but they realize the French would give them very little for it. It is in this thought that Welsh comes up with the idea that he knows where he can get the 65 bucks.

It is also at this time that he is also handed a letter from his father. The unusual letter narrates to him his fathers growing dissatisfaction with being a Jew. He describes how Jacob, Seeger's brother's health has deteriorated and how he suffers from "...fits of depression and hallucination..." (249) since he was discharged from the army.

In the letter, Seeger's father tells him how he continually watches how the Jewish people are being vilified everyday everywhere. He says that everywhere "...restaurants, hotels, clubs, trains - you seem to hear talk about the Jew, mean, hateful, murderous talk..." (251).

These talks have led him to believe that injustice done to the Jews was a good in that it may help people to see that it is against all odds that the Jewish people triumph. He even adds that he finds himself "...looking for Jewish names in the casualty list and secretly being glad when [he] discovers them there."(251).

After reflecting on the content of the letter and having thought of his three friends and how they have had to lay their lives on line a number of times to save him, he decides to sell the German pistol he had taken after killing a German SS officer.

Seeger's father notices how the Jewish people are hated. He hears how even those whom he considered a friend still perceive Jews as the beneficiaries of the war, even after being killed in masses by Germans.

He notices how anything done by a Jew is taken to have been done for self. This view stems from the fact that the Jewish people tended to fight on their own and acting to be strong amidst all the struggles.

For instance, the two old people, "...a little bent old man and a small, shapeless woman..." (253) who stop Seeger and ask him if he is a Jew. When he answers them that he is, the old people "...smiled widely, like children..." (253). They become happy because their blood is also seen as able to avenge for their blood.

For Seeger, the German pistol represents for him an act of justice. A personal gratification for having been the instrument for performing that act of justice. He keeps the luger safely between his bed roll and had even avoided "...all opportunities for selling it, although he had been offered as much as a hundred dollars for it..." (248).

In the story his father narrates for him how he had once heard somebody comment on the death of Roosevelt that " Finally, they got the Jew out of the White House" (251). This shows the negative perception the people had for the president. All he did is not seen as an act of a person but the way of Jews.

It is this perception that drives Seeger to seek his own gratification. A thing he seems to find in the Luger and what it represents for him. He only abandons the luger and agrees to sell it after having realized that his friends do not view him as a Jew, but rather as a person. And that that they don't know what Jews are, they imply that they have.

In conclusion, we see that the transformation that happens to Seeger happens after realizing that true fight for prejudice starts when one is able to trust his friends and receive the same trust.

References

Shaw, Irwin. *Short Stories: Five Decades*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.